

Hidey Hole

It was out of sight of the house, but even so, the children were as secretive about visiting this new green play-palace as if it were indeed a fairy bower which might instantly vanish should too many mortals gaze upon it.

They gradually transferred many of their precious playthings to this sanctuary. A huge box (spirited out of the granary) was installed for a cupboard. It even at times made a little bed when a rug was placed in it. A few cracked dishes, a small broken chair, a little piece of mirror, some grain bags added to their furnishings.

Under the guise of "having a picnic", the children sometimes ate their supper there, and felt like characters out of their rare but precious story books. They were pirates, or fairies or stow-a-ways or witches--the characters changed daily.

Twice on visiting the "Hidey-hole" in the afternoon, the children made a strange discovery. Supplies of food left there the night before had disappeared. They couldn't understand it, and rather angrily each accused the other of not "playing fair". But when it happened the third time and a rug seemed to have been rumpled and disturbed, the children were puzzled and a little frightened.

"Maybe it's a bear," ventured Anna.

"A bear is big and couldn't get through our little door," said the more practical Sara. "It's probably a fox or a weasel."

These animals were common in the woods about; the children often saw them brought in by hunters.

"Let's set a trap," suggested one.

That night they left an extra amount of food in the box-cupboard.

The next morning, with the first signs of daybreak, Sara and Anna crept stealthily out of the house, through the dew-drenched orchard grass and very quietly parted the vines of the green doorway to look within.

It took a moment for their eyes to become accustomed to the gloom in the little bower but when they did, Sara gave a little squeal of shocked surprise and Anna would have given a still louder one if she hadn't clapped a hand over her mouth to prevent it.

All doubled up in the box-cupboard with the little rag rug draped over his shoulder was a Boy! He was asleep, entirely relaxed and conscious of their scrutiny. He looked to be older than they; his face as thin and white, scratched and dirty.

The little sisters were thrilled and a little disturbed. He must have felt their vivid gaze because his eyes opened suddenly; he stared at them a moment, then jumped up into a defensive position as though to ward off danger, and cried in a voice which tried to be fierce but cracked a little, "Don't you come in here or tell anybody -- I've got a big stick and I know how to use it!"

The girls drew back a little, but they had battled with older brothers and the Boy didn't look as fierce as he tried to sound.